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PAPERS ON SCHOOL ISSUES OF THE DAY. VII.

HONORARY DEGREES

AS CONFERRED IN

AMERICAN COLLEGES.

—BY—

CHAS. FOSTER SMITH, A. M., PH. D.,

Professor of Greek in Vanderbilt University.

READ BEFORE THE NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION,
JULY, 1889.



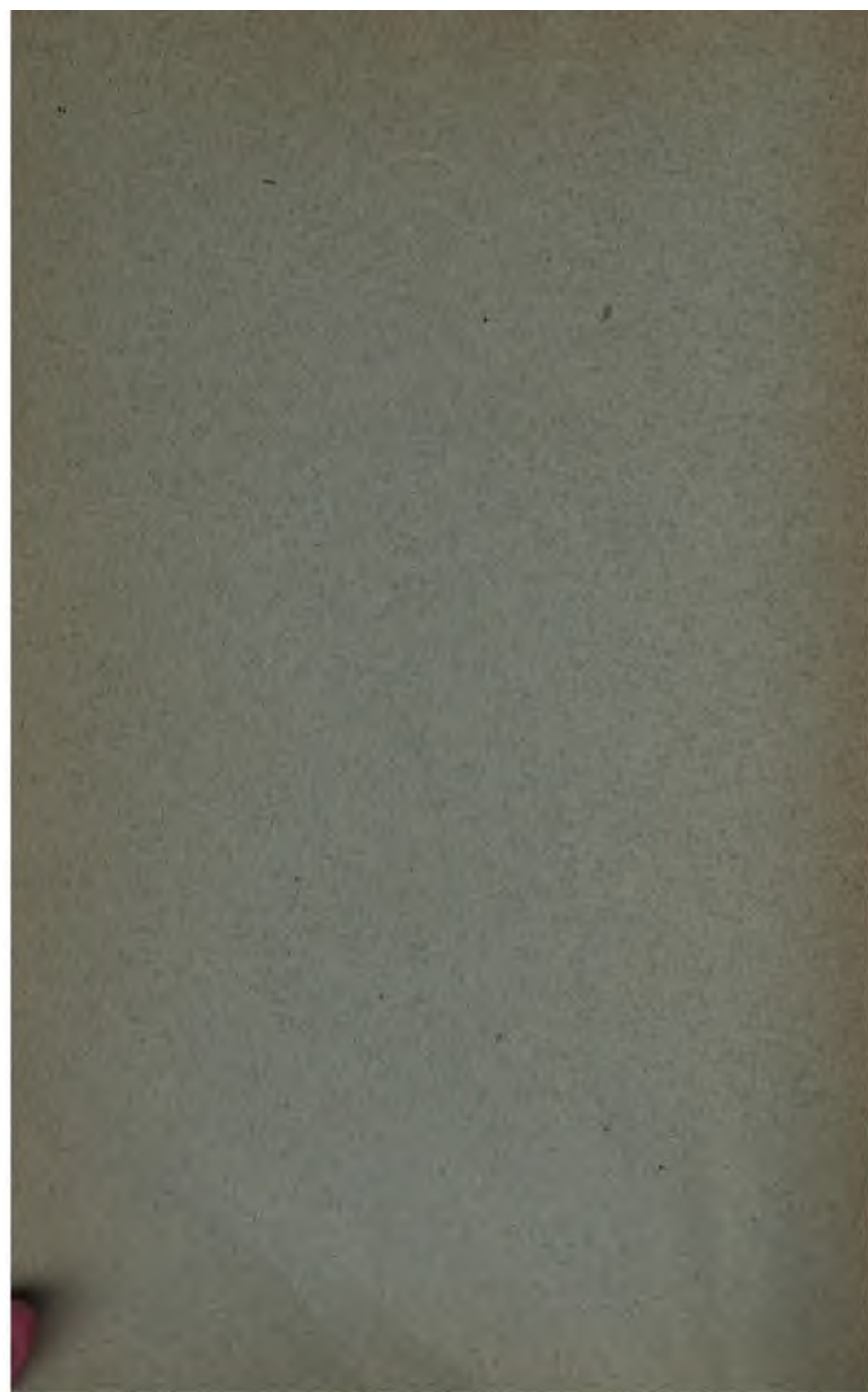
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*HONORARY DEGREES, AS CONFERRED IN AMERICAN
COLLEGES.*

CHARLES FOSTER SMITH, A.M., PH.D.,
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(A paper read before the National Educational Association, at Nashville, Tenn., July, 1889.)

Twenty-two years ago President D. C. Gilman called attention in the *Nation* (August 1, 1867) to some of the evils connected with the wholesale bestowal of honorary doctorates in law and theology, asserting that "the mode in which honorary degrees are conferred in this country is a sham and a shame." "It is so easy to get a degree," he charges, "so many men of slight acquisitions have obtained degrees, that it is now the way to apply for these honors; and if the secret sessions of college corporations were made public, there would be an astounding revelation of intimations and open requests and in-dorsements. Members of the faculties of colleges are constantly applied to to lend their influence to secure a doctorate for this person or that. By designed coincidences, letters are sometimes received from distant points and from very different writers, calling attention to the peculiar merits of this or that candidate, and recommending him to favorable consideration."

Ex-President Woolsey, also, in an article on "Academic Degrees," published in the *Century*, July, 1884, says: "If there are excrescences in the system, such as seem to be hurtful to the advance of real study, every educated man ought to desire that they should disappear. Such we hold to be honorary degrees, especially doctorates in law and in theology; and we believe them to be so little in accord with solid learning that we could wish them to be suppressed, or, if that is impossible, checked and regulated." "The desire to obtain the honor is a desire which no man should indulge," says he further, "and yet the uncertainty and unreasonableness of the rules of selection provoke such a desire, especially in persons who have no good claims by which it can be justified."

My own experience confirms for the South the truth of the charges made by these distinguished college men against the American mode of conferring honorary degrees. Before the first commencement after I became a member of the faculty of a college in South Carolina, a request was received from certain gentlemen of a distant State asking that the degree of D.D. be conferred on Rev. ———, of that State. In addition to the high qualifications claimed for the reverend gentleman, it was stated that he had written a book, and it was thought that the degree would aid him in getting a publisher and help the sale of the book. Not a member of the faculty knew the candidate or any of his friends, and they promptly declined to recommend the bestowal of the degree. Another request that I remember was signed by two or three very well-known clergymen asking that a doc-

torate in theology be granted a preacher from a distant State, who was practically unknown to every member of the faculty, the only ground for the request, so far as known, being the fact that the nominee had been elected to some important church office. I was told that such requests had been not infrequent in the history of the institution. But suppose the college had been weak enough to yield, what would have been the effect? The uninitiated would of course have taken the fact that the degree came from a distant college as proof of the extensive reputation of the new doctor.

A young preacher of promise, considerably under thirty years of age, told me some time ago that being one day at Dr. B.'s, that gentleman said to him, "I am writing to ——— College to ask that the degree of D. D. be conferred on Mr. A.;" and added, "if you would like the degree, I'll offer your name, too." The young man declined; but Mr. A. got the degree. I happen to know that Mr. A.'s name was sent at the same time to another college, which declined to grant him the honor, and thus deprived him of the great glory of being doubly dubbed. I believe that the above is not an uncommon way of securing honorary degrees, especially that of D. D.

The ablest preachers generally get the degree, but so many others receive the same honor that its value is greatly impaired. President Woolsey's remark that "They carry with them no evidence of learning, but only a certain indefinite superiority above others in the same sacred calling," is eminently true. One of the ablest men whom Tennessee has produced used to say: "Some men are doctored for their learning, some for general ability; but I was doctored on the demand of the people." I venture to say that seldom does a college take the trouble to ascertain what qualifications in the way of erudition or literary ability the candidate may have. Prominence, general reputation, preaching ability, success as an evangelist, determine the bestowal so far as the recipient is concerned; various motives of policy often influence the college. A striking example in proof is at hand. One of the strongest literary institutions in the South has lately conferred D. D. on a man who, if he had continued his college course, would at the time he received his doctorate have just finished his junior year in Vanderbilt University. The *causa honoris* in this case was a successful pastorate in the college town.

It not uncommonly happens that the preachers, the newspapers, the people, doctor a man before the colleges are called in. A city could easily be mentioned where a preacher of any prominence is seldom introduced to an audience, or mentioned in the papers, except as "doctor," and this without any regard for the facts in the case. It was observed at the General Conference of the Methodist Church, held in Nashville, in 1882, that on some occasions the presiding bishop recognized every preacher who rose to speak as "Doctor ———, from ———." And at the meeting of the same body in Richmond, 1886, it is said, the committee on public worship, announcing the appointments for the various pulpits the following Sunday, read every appointee as "doctor," until the matter became so ridiculous that the confer-

ence burst into laughter. It is not to be supposed that anybody was in doubt as to anybody's title. It simply is, or is getting to be, the custom.

The evil we complain of, like so many others in educational matters, has come from the over-multiplication of small colleges; and the absurdity to which honorary degree-giving has been carried in some of the weaker backwoods or "one-horse" colleges is almost beyond belief. The story that went the rounds of the papers, a year or two back, about the Texas university whose faculty consisted of a father and two sons, the latter of whom conferred the degree of LL.D. on the old gentleman, receiving in return each a doctorate of philosophy from the grateful sire, created not a little amusement, and was doubtless considered only a huge joke.

But if the Texas story was considered too funny to be true, what will be thought of this which comes from Arkansas and is vouched for by a preacher: "—— Springs" had got on a boom, like most other Southern towns and springs, and the public-spirited citizens determined that they needed, not, as the General Court of Massachusetts in 1647, a school, but in conformity with the era of booms, a college. They were persuaded to this action by a sewing-machine agent, who proposed to be president of the institution. One load of lumber was brought and thrown down upon the lot selected for the college, and on this the board of trustees took their seats and held their first session. The only business transacted was the election of the sewing-machine agent to the degree of D.D., after which they adjourned—to meet no more, for the man with the needle left with his degree, and the college was abandoned.

There are competent witnesses still living who could testify in the case of the man who in consideration of a donation of \$10,000 to a certain college, now happily defunct, was to receive a doctorate in theology. The college performed its part, but the donation was not made. If that gentleman had only known of the institution which is said to have conferred D.D. on the generous donor of a Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, he might have gone down to the grave with the coveted title, and a better name for honesty in keeping his contracts.

In Tennessee, two at least, within my knowledge, of the so-called "female colleges" have conferred honorary doctorates of law or divinity. One of these cases happened on this wise: The "female college" was about to die of inanition, and the president, calling the board of trustees together for the last time, got them to confer the degree of LL.D. upon himself and two others, one a popular preacher.

A very good remark about honorary doctorates of this character is credited to the Rev. Sam Jones. Meeting one day two D.D.'s of recent brand, he said: "So, brethren, you are D.D.'s now? Well, that thing is coming to me some of these days. I feel it in my bones. Not that I am going up to it; but when I see such men as you getting it, I know it is coming down, and it will get to me after awhile."

the class to which it belongs, (namely, B. D., LL. B., M. D. and Ph. D., degrees conferred after examination,) and its transfer to the class of honorary degrees."

My impression is, that in most cases where Ph. D. has been conferred it has been given as a sort of lower LL. D., and just as LL. D. would be given, with or without regard to attainments in physical science. In every instance that has come within my own knowledge this has been the case.

In one other point, too, President Woolsey is wrong. Many persons, doubtless, have supposed, as he did, that the colleges thus conferring Ph. D. as an honorary degree were "chiefly if not entirely seated in the Western States." But the report of the Commissioner of Education tells a different tale. From 1872 to 1885 inclusive, 358 honorary doctorates of philosophy were conferred in the United States, and 156 of these were given in New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey, while only 107 were given in ten Western States. New England has a better record in this respect than the three Middle States, but 44 honorary doctorates of philosophy were conferred in New England colleges, Dartmouth leading with 20; Williams, University of Vermont, and Amherst, 5 each; Bowdoin and Lewis College, 3 each; Colby, Bates, and Maine Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1 each. In 12 Southern States 44 such doctorates were conferred, and 6 in the District of Columbia. All will readily agree with President Woolsey in his objection to the custom which has come into vogue of making the degree honorary; it is simply that he is wrong as to geographical distribution.

It is a pity that the custom has not been confined to small colleges, for then it might easily be rendered ridiculous, and so checked; but when such a protest as that of the Philological and Scientific Associations is unheeded by institutions like Princeton, Amherst, Michigan University, Lafayette, Dartmouth, Hamilton, Madison, Union, Dickinson, Western Reserve, University of Wisconsin, University of North Carolina, De Pauw, University of the City of New York—all of which conferred Ph. D. as an honorary degree the year after the protest or later—it cannot be hoped that the weaker institutions, West, South, or East, will seriously heed the protests of scholars.

Perhaps nothing shows more clearly how serious is the evil connected with the bestowal of honorary degrees, complained of by Presidents Woolsey and Gilman, as the growth of the custom of conferring Ph. D. as an honorary doctorate. The value of the degree, which in Germany is the reward purely of scholarship as proved by examination and other tests, was speedily impaired when colleges big and little all over the land began to confer it as a sort of inferior LL. D. A table will easily show the spread of this as an honorary degree:

	1872.	'73.	'74.	'75.	'76.	'77.	'78.	'79.	'80.	'81.	'82.	'83.	'84.	'85.
No. colleges conferring Ph. D.	7	13	10	12	20	14	21	17	18	29	17	26	19	19
No. honorary Ph. D.'s conferred	7	17	15	19	26	19	31	33	29	49	30	36	25	22

It will be seen that the protest of the philological and scientific associations had seemingly some temporary effect, inasmuch as there was a drop down from 29 colleges conferring 49 honorary doctorates of philosophy in 1881, to 17 colleges with 30 such degrees in 1882; but the very next year the number of colleges so bestowing the degree had again risen to 25 and the degrees to 36.

The worst feature of the matter, however, is not the increase in the number of honorary doctorates of philosophy, but in the advance in the number of colleges, especially small colleges—Western, Middle, and Southern—so conferring the degree. For we find that whereas only seven colleges from five States so conferred the degree in 1872, up to 1885 111 colleges from 32 States had so bestowed it. These included all the Middle States, four New England, ten Western, thirteen Southern, and the District of Columbia. In other words, the custom has spread over the whole country. A hasty glance at the list of 111 colleges that have conferred honorary Ph. D.'s will show that while a number of leading colleges—some of which were mentioned above—have set the bad example, it has been followed principally by the smaller and weaker colleges of the Middle, Western, and Southern States.*

With regard to A. M., the custom was formerly well-nigh universal in American colleges of conferring this second degree three years after graduation on those of their graduates who were engaged in a literary calling, or had prosecuted further studies in any branch. The University of Virginia introduced the English custom of conferring A. M. on examination, just as A. B. Of late years most of the best colleges have adopted this plan; but very many, perhaps most, colleges that confer honorary degrees, though they may have ceased to give A. M. three years after graduation to any of their graduates who apply, still confer it as an honorary degree on their own graduates or others. In 1880—I looked no farther back—119 honorary A. M.'s were conferred; in 1881, 180; in 1882, 138; in 1883, 149; in 1884, 178; in 1885, 140. In these six years, too, I find at least 25 colleges not reported as conferring honorary doctorates which conferred A. M., thus swelling the number to 275. Moreover, as the term "in course" leaves it undetermined whether the degree is conferred on examination or three years after graduation on application, it is reasonable to infer that the number of actual honorary A. M.'s is very much greater still.

One fact of promise for the future is that most of the recently founded, well-endowed and equipped colleges and universities do not confer honorary degrees. The University of Virginia in this, as in so many other respects, set a good example to other institutions, and has never since the opening in

*As to individual colleges, the highest number of honorary doctorates of philosophy during the fourteen years belongs to Lafayette, namely, 24; next comes Princeton, 21; then Dartmouth, 20; the University of Wooster, 20; University of the City of New York, 15; Hamilton, 16; Washington and Jefferson, 13; Union, 11; Madison University and Pennsylvania College, 7 each; University of Michigan, 7; Western Reserve College, 6; the others, from 5 to 1.

1825 departed from the rule to confer no honorary degrees. She has had a goodly and eminently respectable, if not large, following in Boston University, University of California, Vanderbilt,* Purdue, Tulane, University of Texas, and in three of the four best female colleges, namely, Smith, Wellesly, and Bryn Mawr.

Honorary degrees properly bestowed and in reasonable number could not be detrimental. In the best educational systems of Europe they still obtain. But it is clear that the *reductio ad absurdum* is about accomplished in the United States. At least 365 universities and colleges have the right to confer honorary degrees, and within fourteen years 275 separate institutions are found to have exercised the right. And this makes no allowance for the colleges that confer degrees but do not report. These would swell the number considerably. In 1872 the Commissioner of Education received reports from 298 colleges, and of these 83 conferred 235 honorary doctorates; thirteen years later (1884) he received reports from 347 colleges, but this time 139 colleges conferred 320 honorary doctorates. Can even so great a country as the United States produce learned men, great men, or even strong men, sufficient to keep the mills going? But are all these institutions really entitled—except by their charters—to confer honorary degrees? President Woolsey thinks, “Where, in a place of learning a certain branch of study is not taught, there ought to be no degrees given in it.” Applying this test, we find that only forty-eight colleges and universities were reported in 1884 as having theological departments, but a single glance at many of the names in the list shows that if the doctorates might, by being limited to these, be lessened in number, they would not be improved in quality.

Several honorary degrees have recently been conferred by the great colleges on women—and surely no one can find fault with this if the degrees are confined to such women—and this will help for a time to bring up the general average of quality among the doctors. But even this new supply can give only temporary relief. With 250 colleges giving honorary doctorates, the market is sure to be overstocked, and values to depreciate.

Then, too, if the boards of trustees of two or three so-called “female colleges” have conferred honorary doctorates, what is to hinder the practice from becoming general? What if the legion of these so-called “female colleges” all over the South and Southwest had taken to conferring honorary degrees, and had bestowed these honors after the manner in which most of them now grant their diplomas? Add the fact that at least two military academies and six agricultural colleges and industrial universities (which, President Woolsey supposes, “would not think of conferring the degree with which we have to do”) have conferred honorary doctorates. What is to hinder others from doing likewise? Is it not, after all, a mercy that matters are not worse?

*Reserves the right to confer honorary degrees, but has exercised it only once, and then gave ample reasons for making an exception to its announced rule of conduct in favor of an eminent scholar.

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